

Revelation: Because the Time Is Near

Study #3: The Letter to the Church in Ephesus

Jim Elliot was one of five young missionaries martyred by the Auca Indians of Ecuador. Jim was from Portland, Oregon and 29 years old at the time. His advice serves as both an explanation and epitaph for his life. He said, "Wherever you are, be all there. Live to the hilt every situation you believe to be the will of God." Or to say it another way, do nothing halfheartedly. If you think something is worth doing and pleasing to Christ, then be eager, excited, and enthusiastic about it. Do it with every emotion fully engaged!

You say, "Is that Biblical?" Listen to these clear words from the Lord. Colossians 3:23, "And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not to men." Romans 12:11 adds, "Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord." And Ecclesiastes 9:10 urges us, "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom."

So it's Biblical to be passionate about what you're doing. And not just Biblical, it's also just plain common sense. Emerson was right. "Nothing great was ever accomplished without enthusiasm!" Unfortunately, many Christians have lost their zeal, letting the disappointments and difficulties of life rob them of their enthusiasm. Have you? Then no wonder life seems dull. I'm told there's a sign at one point along the Alaskan Highway that warns: "Choose your rut carefully! You'll be in it for the next 200 miles!" Sad to say, that's what many of us do. Instead of living life to the max, we trudge along in the sameness and safeness of our daily routines, refusing to get excited about anything. Why? We're afraid we might be disappointed. Is that true of you? Have you lost the joy of walking in moment-by-moment fellowship with Jesus, our Risen Lord?

That's what happened to the believers in Ephesus. In this week's study of Revelation, we begin the letters to the seven churches of Asia. That was John's assignment while exiled on the island of Patmos. He was to write seven letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor, churches he helped to plant and pastor. And in introducing these letters, I think it's only fair to mention some Bible teachers see a prophetic pattern in these letters—that they are not only seven letters written to seven churches in the first century, which serve as examples to all the churches in church history to come; they also see in them an outline of church history leading up to the return of Christ. For example, Ephesus is the apostolic church that lasted from 33 to 64 AD when official persecution broke out (this is the second stage of church history) against the church for over two hundred years from 65 to 313 AD. Then it's the compromising churches of Pergamum, Thyatira, and Sardis, followed by the great missionary sending churches of the 1700, 1800, and 1900's, until we come to the lukewarm Laodicean church of today, which thinks it's rich but is poor, blind, and naked because of how far it's wandered from the simple faith of the gospel.

Now to the letters themselves. John is told in Revelation 1:19, "Therefore, write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things." This is the first prophecy of the book which takes us all the way through chapter 11, giving us a chronology of the last days before Christ's return to the earth as King. But we can't overlook the second prophecy of this book, which comes later in Revelation 10:11. There John is commanded to "prophesy again about many peoples and nations and tongues and kings."

In other words, what we find in the second half of this book, is a topical study in which John goes back and fills in the details about key characters and events mentioned in chapters 4 to 11.

But today our focus is the church of Ephesus, the super-church of its day and a spiritual model for us in every way but one. For though they served Christ faithfully and well, notice what Jesus says to them in Revelation 2:5, "I have this against you, that you have left your first love." What that means and how to keep it from happening to us and the church we attend is the goal of our study. Let's read the first part of the letter. Then I want to look at several facts about it.

Jesus says to John in Revelation 2:1, "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this: 'I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary.'" First of all, let me share a few facts about the city itself.

1. City

Ephesus was one of the most populous cities of its time. Historians estimate that it was the home of half a million people. Second, it was a prosperous city. It was one of the great seaports and major banking centers of its day, boasting the largest and safest vault in all of Asia. Furthermore, it was a pluralistic city. Located on the main trade route in Asia Minor, Ephesus attracted people from every religious and ethnic background. The most popular religion was the worship of Diana, her Temple one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World and four times the size of the Parthenon in Athens. But it was a perverted city. Diana worship was nothing more than the worship of sex. The goddess was a many-breasted idol symbolizing fertility, and one of the popular ways of worshiping her was temple prostitution.

Cheryl and I had the privilege of visiting the ruins of Ephesus a few years ago, and several things still stand out in our minds. First, the enormity and modernity of the city. The first we were shown on our tour were the public toilets, which consisted of a long stone bench with a hole for each person to sit over and a trough beneath it with water carrying away the waste. Then it was on to the library of Celsus, one of the great libraries of the first century. But as we walked down the path towards it, the guide pointed out several footprints in the stone. They were there to help the young men of the city find their way to the house of prostitution.

2. Challenges

Of course, living in a culturally diverse society has its challenges. Similar to our present culture, tolerance was the great virtue at the time. The Christians in Ephesus were left alone if they kept their mouths shut, restricted their teaching and worship to their church services, and didn't interfere with the religions of others. Sound familiar? One graphic example is Acts 19:24. We're told that before Paul visited the city, one of the most prosperous trades was selling little silver statues of Diana. But then Paul began to preach against idolatry and it put a major dent in their business, leading to a riot that engulfed the entire city. Verse 29 says that he and other Christians were dragged into the amphitheater. Cheryl and I stood in that amphitheater, and

we can attest that it could have held up to 50,000 people. And for two hours, the city shouted, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians! Great is Diana of the Ephesians."

So rather than getting too excited about anything, the Christians in Ephesus learned to temper their zeal and tolerate the immorality and false religions around them. They themselves would never allow false teaching in their church meetings. Verse 2 is very clear about that. But, as they watched their neighbors persisting in their heresy and sin, they found their passion for Christ beginning to wane. Because what ignites our love for Christ is sharing it with others.

We face the same challenge today. For what are we told is the politically correct thing to do when we see sin in our society? "Be tolerant! This is a culturally diverse country, and if we don't accept one another's difference, we won't survive!" And I'm all for tolerance as long as it doesn't weaken our love for Christ or our commitment to the things He's told us to do, like sharing the truth about Jesus in love with our families, neighbors, and friends.

3. Commitment

Verse 2 continues, "I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars." Jesus credits this church with three major commitments.

a) They worked hard for Christ. The word "labor" means to "labor to the point of exhaustion." This was a hard-working church which had overcome the 20/80 rule. What is the 20/80 rule? It is when 20% of the congregation does 80% of the work and the rest sit back and enjoy the fruit of someone else's labor. But that wasn't a problem in Ephesus. Everyone was involved and using their spiritual gifts. Is that true of you? Remember, the important thing is not what you do to serve Christ, but that you do something to bless Christ and His people.

The story is told of Michael Costa, the great conductor. He was directing a rehearsal in which a large orchestra was joined by an even larger choir. Halfway through the session, with trumpets blaring, drums rolling, and violins singing, the piccolo player stopped playing. "After all," he said to himself, "what good am I? No one can hear me." So he kept the instrument in his mouth, but made no sound. With that the conductor brought the rehearsal to a grinding halt, shouting, "Stop! Stop! Where is my piccolo player?" Likewise, there are times when we feel that what we are doing for Christ makes no difference. But don't let that dampen your passion for doing it. Remember, Jesus notices even the smallest cup of cold water given in His name.

b) They suffered long for Christ. Jesus doesn't specify how they suffered. Most likely it was some form of persecution. But they endured it. When it was hardest to serve, they served the hardest. They were tough, strong, and resilient. For verse 3 reads, "And you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary." That is a good reminder to us all. We cannot serve Christ without some degree of suffering. The devil will make sure of it. As Paul warns in 2 Timothy 3:12, "All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." Dr. Richard DeHaan, editor of Our Daily Bread, explains why. "To come to Christ costs nothing. To follow Christ costs something. To serve Christ costs everything." For those who are suffering as you read this, let me ask you: Will you let your suffering deepen your love for Christ? Or will you allow it to make you bitter and kill your passion for Him?

c) They remained true to Christ. You can see this in the middle of verse 2. It reads, “And you cannot bear those who are evil.” In other words, they wouldn’t put up with sin in their church, no matter what form it took—sexual immorality, drunkenness, greed. And it continues, “You have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars.” This is a reference to false teaching. In fact, this verse sums up in a sentence the two categories of sin for which we are to exercise church discipline. People often wonder, “If you practice church discipline, how do you know what to correct? After all, the Bible says ‘we all stumble in many ways.’” But this verse makes it clear. We’re not to nitpick at the minor flaws in one another’s personalities, for ‘love covers a multitude of faults.’ It is only flagrant cases of immorality and heresy we’re to correct, lest they influence others. And if we don’t correct them, Jesus will.

4. Correction

In spite of their faithfulness, Jesus had to correct them. In fact, He begins verse 4 with the strongest Greek connective possible. “Nevertheless,” He says, “I have this against you, that you have left your first love.” By the way, many people misquote this verse. They say, “You have lost your first love.” But that would shift the blame making someone or something else the cause of our attitude shift, maybe even the Lord Himself. “Oh, I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” we say. “The Lord has allowed this or that to happen, and it’s made me lose my enthusiasm as a result!” But when we lose something, it’s accidental. Isn’t it? But Jesus says this was intentional. “You have **left** (the word means to “abandon”) your first love.”

How could this happen? How could a person walk with Christ, be filled with His Spirit, excited about serving Him, and suddenly lose his enthusiasm for Christ? The answer is: Easily. All we have to do is give the strength of our love to something other than Christ—a person, a project, a possession, a hope, a dream, an ambition—and by definition we’ve left our first love.

Think about the Ephesians—how hard they worked for Christ and how faithful they were to the Scriptures. In fact, this church enjoyed the most dynamic procession of pastors in history. First, Paul, then Timothy, then Apollos, then John. But, then, the best Bible teaching in the world does not guarantee a revival. For the Word not only has to be preached in love; it also has to be received in love. And early on Paul noticed among the Ephesians a tendency to substitute duty for love. Listen to his final statement to them in his epistle to the Ephesians. “Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity.” In other words, right from the beginning he felt the need to warn them about their attitudes, that even more important than what we do for Christ is why and how we do it. Are we doing it out of love?

Could this happen to you? If you are a serious student of the Bible, you are in the high risk group. Hal Lindsey warns, “I’ve seen this pattern develop in both churches and individuals, and it seems to be the special weakness of those who are Biblical well-taught. I wouldn’t for a moment suggest that the deep teaching of God’s Word promotes spiritual coolness, but any prolonged study of the Bible which doesn’t produce a great love for Christ is worthless!”

It is so common and dangerous that Jesus issues this warning to us in verse 5. He says, “Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place.” The lampstands, you’ll recall from chapter 1, are symbols of the churches. So this is warning that Jesus Christ, the Lord of the

churches, reserves for Himself the right to disband a church and scatter its members if they do not change their attitudes. This is what happened to the church in Ephesus. Today both the church and city are gone. Silt from the rivers flowing into their harbor filled it up, so that today the harbor is 35 miles away and all that remains of the city is a swamp and a few ruins.

This might not be such a concern to me if I hadn't see it happen to two of the churches where I served, churches that were once full of excitement about what the Lord was doing. But for reasons I won't go into, one church no longer exists and the other has but a handful of people remaining, trying to decide, "Do we keep on meeting? Or is it time to disband?"

5. Counsel

Of course, Doctor Jesus never leaves His people without an effective treatment plan. Here He counsels three steps. First, He says we need to hear. "He who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Notice the word "churches" is plural. You see, even though this letter was originally written to Ephesians, its words are relevant for every church in every age and culture. For even if you've understood everything in this letter, it's possible that you have gradually allowed other things to become more important to you than your love for Jesus. Therefore, like removing wax from your ears so you can hear, Jesus tells us to remove anything and everything that would keep us from taking the steps He's advising. The second of which is to remember. "Remember therefore from where you have fallen." This is an invitation to think back over your Christian life, remember the wonderful beginning you had with Christ, and to ask the Holy Spirit to help you identify how and why you let your passion die.

Finally, He says to repent. In fact, He repeats it twice for the spiritually hard of hearing. "Repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent!" He is referring to our attitudes, that just as we chose to give our love to something other than Christ, in the same way we now have the ability to change our attitudes. In fact, that's what the word "repentance" means. It means to make a change in your thinking. To realize once again that there is nothing better in life than knowing and serving Jesus. And it's amazing once that decision is made, how quickly our love for Christ returns.

I've been guilty of losing my zeal several times over the course of my Christian life. I still remember the first time. I was in college majoring in religion and philosophy and taking classes that denied the Word of God. But I began my degree in that field, and I was determined to finish it there. But as I did, I found my Christian faith beginning to suffer. No longer did I have the joy of my salvation. Next to go was the assurance of my salvation. Soon I felt like I was losing my mind. That's when a Christian friend suggested that I drop out of school and take time to re-evaluate. "I can't do that!" I argued. "I have too much invested in this course of study." But the more I agonized, the more I realized he was right. In fact, the moment I decided to drop those courses, peace flooded my soul and my joy returned. Unbeknownst to me, as a new believer, I was pursuing a goal which was leading me away from Christ and in the process making me miserable. But the moment I changed my mind, my mood completely changed. I wanted to shout at the top of my lungs how much I loved the Lord. I also started attending and serving at a church where I met my wife. But that's a story for another time. The point is I took

time to remember from where I had fallen and I began to do again the things I did at first—like worshiping the Lord, serving in His church, and telling others about His great love.

Some time ago, I was listening to the weatherman on the evening news. The temperature was dropping quickly. So he took a moment to warn his listeners about the danger of frostbite. He described four progressive symptoms: 1) a feeling of extreme coldness; 2) a sensation of tingling; 3) numbness; and finally, 4) a loss of all feeling.

I thought to myself, “Spiritual frostbite isn’t much different!” It begins with a loss of warmth toward God and His people. Next a sense of tingling sets in—little pangs of guilt and shame. But we fail to act on it, so we become numb. There is an awareness that something is wrong. We notice that people don’t care about spiritual things the way they once did. We talk about our church and country needing revival. And we complain that no one is doing anything about it. But we don’t do anything either. That leads to a gradual but certain loss of all spiritual feeling—no interest in the Bible, no concern for the lost, no desire for worship or prayer.

Have you noticed any of these symptoms? Then turn to Doctor Jesus for immediate help! For your condition is desperate. You need to hear, remember, and repent. “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”